

AMERICANIZATION A COMMUNITY PROBLEM

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THE problem of Americanization involves not so much a matter of principles as a matter of methods and a knowledge of conditions. It is not difficult to state what Americanization means. To assimilate peoples of foreign birth into American life, to make newcomers loyal to democratic institutions, to prevent alien communities in our cities, in general to create a truly national spirit—every one recognizes the problem. Social critics are fond of declaring emphatically that "we must" do a thousand and one things, but in the meantime the Americanization of immigrants seems no nearer than it was before the war. Indeed, in a few cases, it is further away than ever, for the aliens who came to America before the war, humbly grateful for a refuge, are now filled with the national self-consciousness of the homeland, and are often more chauvinistic than their countrymen at home. They have never really known America, but they have been long enough away to idealize their native countries. America is to them only workaday reality; their homelands from which they were glad to escape are now their ideal.

Like all other human beings, immigrants fall into many classes. In the first place there are the adaptable immigrants of all groups. These recognize their opportunities, take advantage of the freedom of America, quickly rise in education and resources, and form one of the most valuable elements in the national amalgam. The second group is composed of irreconcilables from many nations, usually men of considerable mental attainments, embittered by struggle and poverty in the land of their birth, disappointed in the economic competition of this country. There are always men who do not possess the patience to work hard and faithfully for success, and are hence forced to remain poor. Their tastes are naturally those of rich men; their environment is that of poor men. Possessing none of the qualifications for business success, they conclude that the organization of society is radically wrong. Agitators and malcontents, once, they are revolutionaries now, having a more bitter hatred for America than for the countries whence they came, for America is their land of disappointed dreams. With both these classes Americanization has little to do.

The first will take care of itself; the second is the active foe of Americanization. Determined to permit no one else disappointment, this second class does its best to create and foster suspicion and hatred. Owning nothing, rebellious on principle, it works mischief among those whose poverty make them food for revolution, or those whose idealism makes them easy prey for social theories.

There are two other classes: the immigrant of little education or mental attainment, who furnishes the heavy unskilled labor of the country, dull, inert, and slow to respond to anything but a material impulse, and the immigrant who is genuinely interested in America and wants to make America his home. Both these classes are good material for Americanization. If properly approached, they can be mingled with the community and helped to take at least as much share in the responsibilities of American life as the native born of equal mental ability. But the work requires knowledge, skill, tact, and the proper environment.

In the first place the influence of the malcontents ought not to be allowed to offset the efforts of Americanization. The agitator without a country has every advantage. He knows the language of the immigrants, he lives among them, and he burns with the zeal of his doctrine. While the Americanization worker is laboring with limited funds, with the handicap of a foreign language, and with the indifference of his fellow-Americans, the agitator gives his whole time with reckless disregard of poverty or punishment and with a knowledge of every weak point in the immigrants' psychology. It is well to talk of education, but education is more than a few well-intentioned classes in English plus a few lectures. Education is that which affects a man at every point, and for each point at which the Americanization worker touches the immigrant, the agitator has twenty points of contact.

Americanization can be fully successful only as it recognizes that education is a matter of environment. If unemployment is widespread, Americanization is impotent. The jobless man will not love and understand America. If the cost of living places the elementary comforts of life beyond the

reach of the worker of mediocre ability he cannot feel that America deserves his gratitude and sacrifice. An architect recently said, "The solution of the housing problem is three-quarters of Americanization." He is very nearly right. A prominent social worker says, "Give him (the immigrant) a chance to make an honest living, pay him a living wage, present to him an opportunity for the so much talked about right of the pursuit of happiness, keep him away from the selfish politician, help him to discriminate between his friend and his enemy, protect him from the evil influences of corrupt democracy, exhibit the American virtues as conspicuously as you exhibit its shortcomings and faults, and it will not be difficult to get an expression of true patriotism, based upon a deep-rooted appreciation of all the blessings that the immigrant can acquire in this country." He is right. The Americanization worker should remember that the immigrant has the same limited outlook as the ordinary American "man on the street." The advantages of our political democracy mean little to the man whose outlook is primarily economic. Congress is hundreds of miles away, but the factory is round the corner. The Supreme Court is in Washington, but the policeman is in the immigrant's block. The Americanization worker should remember that the immigrant is a human being whose emotions and affections are far more deeply rooted than his judgment and reason. Hence he should do his best to see that the conditions surrounding the immigrant are such as will draw him into the best in America.

One mistake the Americanization worker is likely to make. Hatred, and justly, hating, the hyphenate political allegiance which caused so much trouble in our country, he tries to drive out of the immigrant's mind all loyalty to and love for the cultural and domestic traditions of his native land. Nothing does more harm to genuine Americanization than lack of respect for a man's inherited social background. So long as a man is willing to live within the law and help to further our ideas of political democracy, it matters little if corduroy trousers and spaghetti suit him better than woolen trousers and apple pie. The Greek, for instance, prizes highly the traditions of ancient Greece. Let him prize them—they make him a better American. In art, letters, and non-po-

litical thought a little hyphenatism breeds fertility.

It is obvious that the problem is not one for individuals or societies—it is an affair of the community, and as education in the broadest sense of that term it ought to be handled by public educational agencies. Such agencies, while not always perhaps thoroughly efficient, are at least quite free from bias. Best of all, they command the complete confidence of the immigrant. They are at present actively and most successfully engaged in Americanizing his children. Let public agencies extend their efforts into the field of community education. Let them set out by public community centres and by factory classes organ-

ized under public direction to teach the immigrant English and a knowledge of American institutions. Where the plan of Americanization by community effort, with the practical co-operation of public educational agencies, has been tried it has proved successful. The immigrant comes to know the English-speaking community, and they come to know him. Indeed, one of the best elements in this plan is the fact that native-born Americans are roused to a reaffirmation of their Americanism in a dynamic, virile, and practical way. If such community education is worked out on a large scale there is every reason to hope for a new basis of reciprocal confidence and respect.